

## Sunday 2 May 2010: Fifth Sunday of Easter

### Love One Another, as I Have Loved You

**Readings: Acts 11.1-18; John 13.31-35**

Last week at our Annual Parochial Church Meeting, Nick, our vicar, talked about the way in the last year our congregations had been growing in all our services, and of course there is a real sense of hope and joy in this. He also said that many of those new members of St Martin's were not just new Christians but refugees from other churches, or those coming back to the church after time out, seeking to find a church where their life experiences could be recognised and they could feel included. One of the saddest things for all Christians must be the realisation of the hurt, pain and betrayal which actually takes place within the church itself among we who profess to follow Christ. It often seems that the Church has plenty to say challenging equality laws but less to say challenging **inequalities**. The Bible itself has often been used to add to that sense of inequality, exclusion, and hurt. Certainly some of the Bible is hard to read in our contemporary world. Last week in Morning Prayer I had to read a passage from Exodus where Moses saw that those who were following him had been disobedient to God so he gathered together the sons of Levi told them to put on their swords and go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp with the order: "each of you kill your brother, your friend and your neighbour." After the sons of Levi had killed about three thousand that day Moses said "Today you have ordained yourself to the service of the Lord." With images of present day religious fundamentalism, war and genocide and complicity in torture in my thoughts I have to say these words were hard to read. I always remember reading a particularly brutal passage of the Bible in church one day and ending "Here ends the first lesson" and someone calling out from the congregation "Thank God!"

While certain Bible passages can be difficult to stomach on a national or international level, there are passages which have been used to cause a lot of pain on a personal level. St Ignatius recognised that while a sense of guilt and shame can bring the sinner to God, the false God can also use guilt and shame to lead the believer away from God into desolation and fear. In the recent Van Gogh exhibition at the Royal Academy there is a still life of the Bible he painted; it is leather-bound, heavy, dark and yellowing against a black background. Beside it the stub of a candle is snubbed out and the Bible is contrasted by another book on the table, Emile Zola's naturalist novel "La Joie de vivre." Van Gogh wrote of the "rayon noir", the black light of religion with "the icy coldness that hypnotised." How different this oppressive looking Bible from the burning gold of the sun against which he painted Lazarus being raised from the dead, or his landscapes infused with energy movement, wind and life. When the Bible is used to deny the inner life-stories of its adherents, the false God can kill, deform, and oppress the Spirit. The writer James Alison presents this dialectic as an interior dialogue which perhaps some of us will recognise taking place between our inner selves and the false God:

God I want to love you but I can't love you as you are because you are sinful.  
Self Well what must I do to be loved?  
God You must become somebody different.  
Self How do I do that? This is how I am. How do I get to become the sort of person who can be loved by God?  
God If I were you I would start somewhere else.  
Self How can I start somewhere else?  
God You can't! Give up on the love thing, just obey and be paralysed.

Well, our two Bible passages for today, I believe, tell a very different story. They tell the story which is at the very heart of our Gospel, the good news of a God who shows no partiality – a God who is for all and in all.

Look at how Luke in Acts of the Apostles captures this process taking place. James Alison's exegesis of this passage conveys how hugely significant this testimony of divine impact in the midst of a very human situation is. It is brilliant storytelling which, with great economy, conveys the essence of Christian revelation breaking through barriers and prejudice. Peter is a Jew, as he follows Jesus he has been part of a ministry which has been almost exclusively confined to the Jewish people. In fact Jesus has repeatedly directed them towards their own people. Peter has assumed reasonably enough that all he has witnessed has been for the benefit of Israel and the Jewish people. He has followed seemingly unquestioningly the cultural rules and traditions of his Jewish faith and background. These laws relating to food, and purification and the taboo of entering the house of a Gentile were no small thing. These rules were marks of identity and covenant by which a people held onto their purity and preserved their identity and their faith in God. And now a bizarre dream challenges that very identity and holiness code. It challenges Peter with the vision that all food is created by God and nothing which God has made clean is profane. Peter is confused but the barriers are breaking down. When he meets the Gentile Cornelius asking him into his home, he finds himself able to do nothing else – Peter crosses the threshold and enters the house of a Gentile, something unacceptable for a Jew.

But the story does not stop there. Until this point Peter has been witnessing to the house of Israel but now he finds himself telling the story of Jesus to the whole household of Cornelius. The story of Jesus, the story of one born in and for God's chosen people of Israel is now being told for the so called 'unchosen'. The story is widening, the inclusive love of this story cannot be held back or confined. Peter, in such a human way, and without planning, now seems to believe that somehow this story is also for those who he had always considered, or his religion had considered, repugnant, profane, and unclean, an abomination, unworthy of God's love. But the revelation does not stop there. As Peter is in the midst of telling his story we are told that the Holy Spirit falls upon those who heard the word, falls upon these Gentiles. Peter is stunned. Up until this point there is perhaps a justification for his actions. Perhaps he believed that God through the vision was initially telling him to enter the house of a Gentile, that is a huge step, more than that perhaps by telling the story of Jesus he could convince them they were sinners who needed to purify themselves and maybe even seek circumcision. Yet no, it has gone so much further than that. They too, these Gentiles have become recipients of the Holy Spirit. Something has happened; something which may seem insignificant but will change everything. A new dimension of God's incredible love has burst through and no one will ever be able to block it out again. James Alison writes:

“In this frozen frame we see the dawning realisation that God likes the so called impure people too. That God wants them to be inside his story just as they are. God is not confronting them to get them to repent, or even inviting them to become something else. God is possessing them with delight and they are delighting in being possessed by the love of God. They are starting to tell a story, which in theory is an impossible story, of how they have come to discover themselves as liked by God.”

Peter knows that things can never be the same, although perhaps he would like to put the Spirit back in the bottle. Somehow he must convince the Christians in Jerusalem about what has happened. They are all complaining and criticising him for eating with the uncircumcised. Somehow he must risk division and have the courage to profess what he, through the Spirit of God, has experienced to be true. All Peter can do is to tell the truth of what has happened: God's truth breaking human prejudice and turning things upside down. It

is a paradigm shift in religious understanding – The Alpha and the Omega – God open for all. Peter says: “If God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I then that I could hinder the work of God?”

This is the Spirit of God revealed in his scriptures: a Spirit which continues throughout history to confront challenge and uproot our deepest prejudices and fears. It is not about the letter of the law or an outward self-righteousness – it is about a new Spirit and a new heart, removing hearts of stone and receiving hearts of flesh. Start where Peter started with what is real and practical, start with the person knocking at your door – the Spirit leading you to widen your understanding of God’s love. This is the Spirit that falls upon all nations, and creeds – black and white and of every colour – and continues to challenge the evils of slavery and exploitation. This is the Spirit which must continue to root out the greed that creates poverty, this is the Spirit which must challenge the rich and powerful about the way we use the world’s resources and challenge how profits are made at the expense of the poor. This same Spirit challenges about the way women are treated and oppressed, and empowers with gifts of leadership. This is the Spirit which does not judge according to race or faith or ethnicity but which hears the cry of the world’s poorest. This is the Spirit which has finally opened eyes to the oppression of gay and lesbian people, who are made in the image of God, loved by God, and on whom and in whom God’s Spirit is also poured out. It is Christ’s call echoing through the Scriptures; “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another.”

Yesterday I asked Sam from Afghanistan why he wanted to be confirmed and baptised at St Martin’s on 16th May. He told me “I am trying to understand. It is a big work. Jesus knows how to feel what is me. Jesus is saying ‘I love you. I love you more than my life.’ He is saying this not just to one person but to all persons.” Amen.